

Birdwatching in Malawi

Bob Medland

Résumé: Le Malawi peut ne pas apparaître sur un grand nombre de listes des dix premiers pays à visiter par les ornithologistes, 651 espèces y ont néanmoins été signalées et plus de 525 d'entre elles s'y reproduisent et incluent des espèces aussi énigmatiques que l'Alèthe du Mont Cholo, *Alethe choloensis*, et la Grive-akalat tachetée, *Modulatrix stictigula*. Un grand nombre des spécialités du pays sont soit des espèces endémiques de la forêt tropicale ou de la forêt claire de *Brachystegia*, difficiles à trouver dans le reste de l'Afrique. Cela, combiné à l'accès aisé à la plupart des régions du pays, fait du Malawi une destination excitante à visiter.

Didn't that used to be part of Rhodesia? Next to Kenya isn't it? Any endemics? These are usually the first questions I am asked when I mention Malawi and the answer to all of them is no. Formerly it was the Nyasaland Protectorate, it's landlocked between Tanzania, Mozambique and Zambia and the only species close to being endemic is the Thyolo Alethe *Alethe choloensis* which is found also in a couple of forests just across the border in Mozambique.

So why go there for the birds? Well, I did in 1984 and ended up staying for ten years. Whilst Malawi may not be in the world's top ten in the league of birdwatching countries its checklist stands at 651 (of which over 525 are known to breed) - not bad for somewhere the size of England - and during a two week visit one can see over 400 species. Many of the real goodies are either rainforest or *Brachystegia* woodland endemics and can be difficult to find elsewhere. Access around the country is excellent, it has a pleasant climate, has adequate accommodation of a reasonable standard/cost in the right places and the people are very friendly.

For the factbook

Malawi is a small country, lying between latitudes 9 and 14 degrees south and straddling the southern end of the Great Rift Valley. It is just over 800 km long and up to 150 km wide, and a quarter of its surface comprises the great lake, named after the country and the third largest in Africa. The whole country, including the lake, is drained by the Shire (pronounced Shirry) River, which joins the Zambezi in Mozambique. The rift floor, up to 75 km wide, is the hottest part of the country, and comprises mainly acacia savanna and thicket, with dense *Brachystegia* / evergreen woodland in the humid north around Nkhata Bay. The rest of the country consists of high plateaux at around 1,000 m above sea-level. Rising higher are numerous isolated highlands, the principal ones being Nyika Plateau in the north, at 2,400 m, Ntchisi and Dedza Mountains in the centre and the spectacular Mulanje Mountain, which rises to 3,000 m in the south-

east corner. Most of the country is intensively farmed (maize, tobacco and tea) and with over 9 million people it has one of the highest population densities in Africa. Nevertheless around 13% of the land is set aside in a series of forest and wildlife reserves. Inevitably, there is considerable population pressure on these areas and the government conservation departments and the Wildlife Society are fighting to improve protection and environmental education. Sadly though, this is a losing battle in some places.

The habitats and their birds

Rocky hills and mountain tops

These are scattered around the country: Mulanje Mountain is by far the biggest whilst the lakeshore hills are probably the best place to find aerobic **Verreaux's Eagles** *Aquila verreauxi*, usually seen hunting for dassies (**Rock Hyrax** *Heterohyrax brucei*) along the ridges of hills. Other common raptors are **Augur Buzzard** *Buteo rufofuscus* and **Lanner Falcon** *Falco biarmicus* whilst **Taita Falcon** *F. fasciinucha* is rare. **Mocking Cliff-chat** *Myrmecocichla cinnamomeiventris* are commonly found at any altitude and **Black Storks** *Ciconia nigra* nest sparsely throughout the country.



Mulanje Mountain, Malawi (Bob Medland)
Montagnes de Mulanje, Malawi (Bob Medland)

Montane Grassland

Principally on the Nyika Plateau and Mulanje Mountain. The former holds breeding pairs of **Wattled Crane** *Bugeranus carunculatus*, and **Denham's Bustards** *Neotis denbami* and the occasional **Secretary Bird** *Sagittarius serpentarius*. **Red-breasted Sparrowhawks** *Accipiter rufiventris* often hunt along earth roads in front of vehicles, and in the rainy season, four species of **harrier** *Circus* spp may be found quartering the valleys. However the real specialities are the passerines. Of the **sunbirds**, **Bronze Nectarinia** *kilimensis*, and **Malachite** *N. famosa* are fairly common whilst **Scarlet-tufted Malachite** *N. johnstoni* and **Greater Double-collared** *N. afra* are less so. The local race of **Rufous-naped Lark** *Mirafra africana isolata* is endemic to the Nyika and whilst on the subject of 'little brown jobs', there are plenty of cisticolas to grapple with, including another Nyika endemic, the nominate race of **Ayres's Cloud Cisticola** *Cisticola ayresii*, which performs an impressive, if apparently suicidal, sky-diving display. Finally, no list would be complete without mentioning the **Blue Swallow** *Hirundo atrocaerulea*: now on the threatened list for southern Africa due to loss of breeding habitat, fortunately the Nyika is a safe stronghold for this graceful hirundine.



Blue Swallow *Hirundo atrocaerulea*
By Mark Andrews

Evergreen forest

Ornithologically this is probably the most important habitat in Malawi, ranging from cool and misty montane forest patches to hot, humid lakeshore forests. At times apparently devoid of birds, at other times it can seem as if the branches are dripping with birds of a riotous assortment of vivid colours - turacos, trogons, robins and apalises, all trying to outdo each other. As with all forest birdwatching, wait and be patient - but watch out for red ants! For this reason, I recommend wearing shorts: once ants get up long trousers, your birdwatching composure has had it! Common in many forests throughout the country are stunners such as **White-starred Robin** *Pogonocichla stellata*, **Bar-tailed Trogon** *Apaloderma vittatum* and **Cape Batis** *Batis capensis* whilst there is a selection of nine greenbuls for the enthusiasts. In the far north, the

Misuku Hills are capped with three forests, the only location in Malawi for the enigmatic **Spot-throat** *Modulatrix stictigula* and the recently separated **Short-tailed Batis** *Batis mixta*. Relatively unspoilt and a long way off the beaten track, the Misukus are beautiful forests and the best place also for finding **Silvery-checked Hornbill** *Bycanistes brevis*, **Oriole Finch** *Linurgus olivaceus* and **Shelley's (Montane) Greenbul** *Andropadus masukuensis*. On the Nyika Plateau, Zovo Chipolo and Chowo (the latter actually just inside Zambia) are the best forests for **White-chested Alethe** *Alethe fuelleborni*, **African Hill Babbler** *Pseudoalcippe abyssinica*, **Olive-flanked Robin-chat** *Cossypha anomala* and **Fülleborn's Black Boubou** *Laniarius fuelleborni*. In contrast, not only climatically, are the lakeshore forests of Kalwe and Nkwadzi near Nkhata Bay. Whilst **Crested Guinea fowl** *Guttera pucherani* probably no longer exists there due to hunting, this is the best location for **East Coast Akalat** *Sheppardia gunningi*. The local race, *bensoni*, is endemic to Malawi and was named after the late Con Benson (father of Malawi's ornithology and author of many books and hundreds of papers, his contribution to the science throughout the region was astonishing in its extent and thoroughness). Nkwadzi usually turns up **Yellowbill** *Ceuthmochares aereus* and **Crested Flycatcher** *Trochocercus cyanomelas*. Still in the north, the Viphya Mountains, apart from hosting an endemic race of **Scaly Francolin** *Francolinus squamatus doni*, have the dubious claim to fame for being blanketed by southern Africa's largest pine plantation. However, the surviving ribbons of riparian forest are easily accessible and are still good places for **Olive Woodpecker** *Mesopicus griseocephalus* and **Red-faced Crimsonwing** *Cryptospiza reichenovii*. From Lilongwe, Ntchisi and Dedza Mountains are in easy reach: the former is as good a place as any for the magnificent **Crowned Eagle** *Stephanoaetus coronatus*, **Bar-tailed Trogon** and **Chestnut-throated Apalis** *Apalis porphyrolaema*, whilst Dedza can usually be relied on to provide **Olive Bush-shrike** *Malaconotus olivaceus*. In the south, the hilltop forests of Soche and Thyolo compete with Mulanje for ornithological brilliance: I have never had a bad day in any of these, whatever the weather. Thyolo's specials are an elitist bunch: **White-winged Apalis** *A. chariessa*, **Green-headed Oriole** *Oriolus chlorocephalus*, **Black-fronted Bush-shrike** *M. nigrifrons*, **Green Barbet** *Stactolaema olivacea*, **Grey Cuckoo-shrike** *Coracina caesia* and, of course, **Thyolo Alethe**. All these southern forests hold the three forest thrushes, **Mountain** *Turdus abyssinicus*, **Spotted**

Ground Zootera fischeri and **Orange Ground Z. gurneyi**. The latter is the commonest: strikingly coloured as it works its way through the leaf-litter, it renders a beautiful song especially at dusk.

Brachystegia Woodland

'Miombo' is the local name for this attractive, broad-leaved woodland which is dominated by the genera *Brachystegia* and *Julbernardia*. Not dissimilar to English oak woodland at first sight, this biome forms an enormous swathe across south-central Africa from Angola to Mozambique and Tanzania. One of the best areas is Dzalanyama, an hour south of Lilongwe. One of the features of this habitat is the tendency for many species to form loose feeding flocks as they work their way through the mid-stratum and canopy. Miombo birdwatching is a pretty easy-going affair: you just drive slowly along until you come across a bird party: stop and get out and you may well pick up twenty or more species in five minutes. The many miombo specials include **White-tailed Blue Flycatcher** *Elminia albicauda*, **Olive-headed Weaver** *Ploceus olivaceiceps*, **Stierling's Woodpecker** *Dendropicos stierlingi* (almost unknown outside Malawi), **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater** *Merops birundineus*, **Miombo Rock Thrush** *Monticola angolensis* and the two **hyliotas**, **Southern Hyliota** *hyliota australis* and **Yellow-breasted** *H. flavigaster*. Miombo also has its own endemic (or nearly so) sunbirds. These are all stunningly attractive, iridescent little gems including **Anchieta's Sunbird** *Anthreptes anchietae*, **Shelley's** *Nectarinia shelleyi* and **Amethyst** *N. amethystina*. In the breeding season (September-October), don't leave the woods until nightfall as several species of nightjar, including spectacular **Pennant-winged Nightjars** *Macrodipteryx vexillaria*, are fairly common along roads at dusk. The list goes on...

Acacia woodland and savanna

Essentially there are two main types of *Acacia* habitat in Malawi. Around Lilongwe there is dense woodland dominated also by *Combretum* and *Piliostigma* trees. Lilongwe Nature Sanctuary is a fine example and probably the only remaining intact remnant of this habitat in Malawi. While not holding any particular endemics it supports a tremendous variety of species and is useful for catching up on those species missed out elsewhere. Typical of the canopy are **Black-headed Oriole** *O. larvatus*, **Sulphur-breasted Bush-shrike** *M. sulfureopectus*, **African Paradise Flycatcher** *Terpsiphone viridis* and **Chin-spot Batis** *B. molitor*. *Acacia* savanna is more open and found at lower altitudes in the Rift Valley. Best examples are in the Monkey Bay area and Lengwe National Park. The

most obvious birds, as a result of their abundant nest colonies, are **White-browed Sparrow Weavers** *Plocepasser mahali*. Family parties of **Green Woodhoopoe** *Phoeniculus purpureus* provide great entertainment with their antics and manic cackling and loose flocks of **Southern Carmine Bee-eaters** *Merops nubicus* often hawk overhead outside their breeding season. Competitors for food and nest-sites, **Dickinson's Kestrels** *F. dickinsoni* and **Lilac-breasted Rollers** *Coracias caudata* are common and often engage in noisy aerial battles. In contrast, depressed-looking **Southern Ground Hornbills** *Bucorvus cafer* plod their way around the grassland in search of anything edible.

Dambo grassland

Known as 'vleis' further south, these are seasonally-inundated, shallow valleys. In the rains, they are excellent for many species of brilliantly-coloured **widowbirds** and **bishops** *Euplectes* spp., also **Yellow-throated** and **Rosy-breasted Longclaws** *Macronyx croceus* and *M. ameliae*. **Red-chested Flufftails** *Sarothrura rufa* are commonly heard calling at dusk but irritatingly difficult to see.

Mopane woodland

Almost restricted to Liwonde National Park, this deciduous woodland is ornithologically less exciting than others although it is the only location for **Lilian's Lovebird** *Agapornis lilianae* (common in flocks) whilst **Racket-tailed Roller** *C. spatulata* is not uncommon and **Meves's Glossy Starling** *Lamprolornis mevesii* is ever-present.

Thicket

Difficult to define, thickets are now much reduced in Malawi; certainly the only extensive area is restricted to Lengwe Wildlife Reserve in the lower Shire Valley. It is excellent for a wide variety of species scarcely found elsewhere including **Crested Guineafowl**, **Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill** *Tockus leucomelas*, **Vanga Flycatcher** *Bias musicus*, **Woodward's Batis** *Batis fratrum* and the elusive **Gorgeous Bush-shrike** *Malaconotus viridis* (so elusive that I never managed to find it) and the minute but elegant **Livingstone's Flycatcher** *Erythrocercus livingstonei*. A surprising number of rainforest species share a liking for this habitat, eg **Square-tailed Drongo** *Dicrurus ludwigii* and **Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird** *Pogoniulus bilineatus*.

Water and wetlands

Dominated by the vast expanse of Lake Malawi, the country has extensive wetlands in the Rift Valley. Rightly so, the **African Fish Eagle** *Haliaeetus vocifer*

is Malawi's national bird and is found wherever there is open water. The southern end of the lake holds the greatest population density anywhere in Africa, with pairs holding territory and nesting every half kilometre or so along the shore. Liwonde Wildlife Reserve is excellent for night-time trips to find **Pel's Fishing Owl** *Scotopelia peli* and **White-backed Night Heron** *Gorsachius leuconotus*. But for wetland birds in general, a summary probably says it all: 18 species of herons and egrets, eight storks, 15 plovers and nine kingfishers.

The reserves

There are nine wildlife reserves (formerly known as national parks or game reserves) and many forest reserves. Essential for any visit are Nyika, Liwonde and Lengwe WRs, also Dzalanyama and Mulanje Mountain FRs.

Nyika Wildlife Reserve

3,134 km² of *Brachystegia* woodland, montane grassland and rainforest patches in the far north and about eight hours drive from Lilongwe. Cool climate and spectacular scenery. Commonly seen mammals include Leopard *Panthera pardus*, Roan Antelope *Hippotragus equinus*, Burchell's Zebra *Equus burchelli*, Reedbuck *Redunca arundinum* and Bushpig *Potamochoerus porcus*.



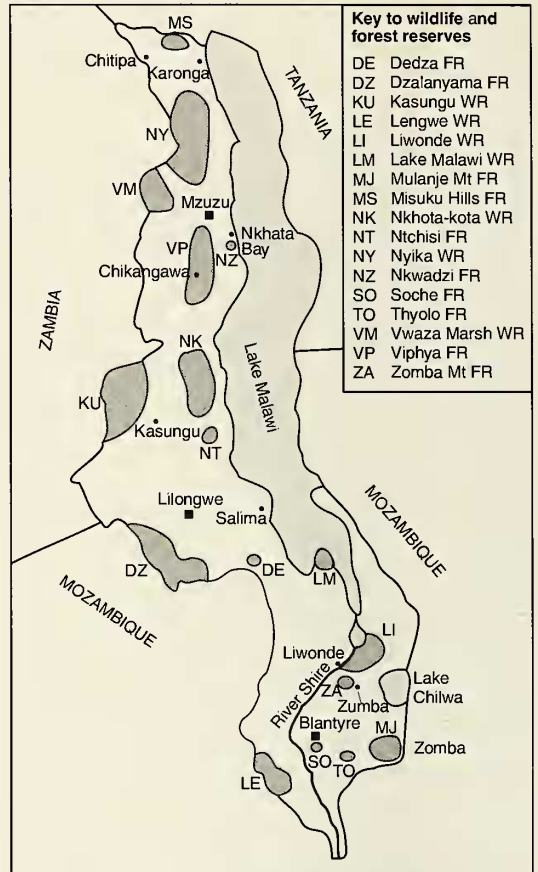
Nyika Wildlife Reserve, Malawi (Bob Medland)
Parc national de Nyika, Malawi (Bob Medland)

Liwonde Wildlife Reserve

548 km² of river, marsh and mopane woodland in the Shire Valley. Ignoring (if you can) the countless crocs, hippos, antelope and elephants, one of the most impressive day's birdwatching anywhere in the world must be from a boat trip on the Shire River

Lengwe Wildlife Reserve

887 km² of thicket and mixed open woodland in the far south. Hot and dusty but great birdwatching and



Key to wildlife and forest reserves

DE	Dedza FR
DZ	Dzalanyama FR
KU	Kasungu WR
LE	Lengwe WR
LI	Liwonde WR
LM	Lake Malawi WR
MJ	Mulanje Mt FR
MS	Misuku Hills FR
NK	Nkhota-kota WR
NT	Ntchisi FR
NY	Nyika WR
NZ	Nkwadzi FR
SO	Soche FR
TO	Thyolo FR
VM	Vwaza Marsh WR
VP	Viphya FR
ZA	Zomba Mt FR

Wildlife and forest reserves in Malawi
Réserve de la faune sauvage et des forêts au Malawi

home to the rare Nyala Antelope *Tragelaphus angasi*. A dawn watch from the hide at the main waterhole is a magical experience and can be rewarded by anything from Cape Buffalo *Syncerus caffer* to the rare Madagascar Squacco Heron *Ardeola idae*.

Dzalanyama Forest Reserve

An extensive range of miombo-clad hills only one hour from Lilongwe

Others

Lake Malawi WR: sandy beaches, snorkelling and lakeshore hills and islands. Kasungu and Nkhotakota WR's: extensive *Brachystegia*. Viphya FR: mainly pine plantation but some montane grassland and riparian rainforest. Nkwadzi FR: lakeshore rainforest. Lilongwe Nature Sanctuary: dense *Acacia* woodland with a river in the heart of the modern capital, well worth visiting at the beginning/end of a trip. Michiru Conservation Area: regenerating *Brachystegia* within Blantyre city limits.



Boehm's Bee-eater *Merops boehmi*, Senga Hills, Malawi, August 1993 (Bob Medland)
Le guépier de Boehm, Merops boehmi, Collines de Senga, Malawi, août 1993 (Bob Medland)



Brachystegia forest, Thambani Mountain,
Malawi (Bob Medland)
Forêt claire de Brachystegia, Montagnes de Thambani,
Malawi (Bob Medland)



Wattled Crane *Bugeranus carunculatus*, Nyika National Park,
April 1992 (Bob Medland)
Grue caronculée, Bugeranus carunculatus, Parc national de
Nyika, avril 1992 (Bob Medland)

Suggested Itinerary

Ideally three weeks to cover all habitats: Lilongwe; Dzalanyama; Zomba; Lengwe; Mulanje; Liwonde; Lake Malawi; Nyika; Viphya; Lilongwe. Two or more nights essential where underlined.

Getting there from Europe

Three flights a week (KLM, BA) direct to Lilongwe and various cheaper alternatives via Addis Ababa (Ethiopian), Nairobi (Kenyan), Harare (Air Zimbabwe) etc.

When

The peak season for breeding woodland and forest species is October-December; wait until February for the breeding widows and bishops. For cooler, more pleasant weather, try April or September when bird-watching is still excellent.

Getting around

Public transport is not recommended. Car hire is expensive but readily available although reliability is variable. 4WD not necessary except for some reserves (eg Nyika) January-April. Main roads are excellent (metalled), secondary roads are usually okay even in the rainy season. Local safari operators include Central African Wilderness Safaris (Box 489, Lilongwe), Heart of Africa (Box 8, Lilongwe and Kambuku Trails (Box 1304, Blantyre). *I will be happy to provide further information and arrange and/or lead specialist safaris.*

Accommodation

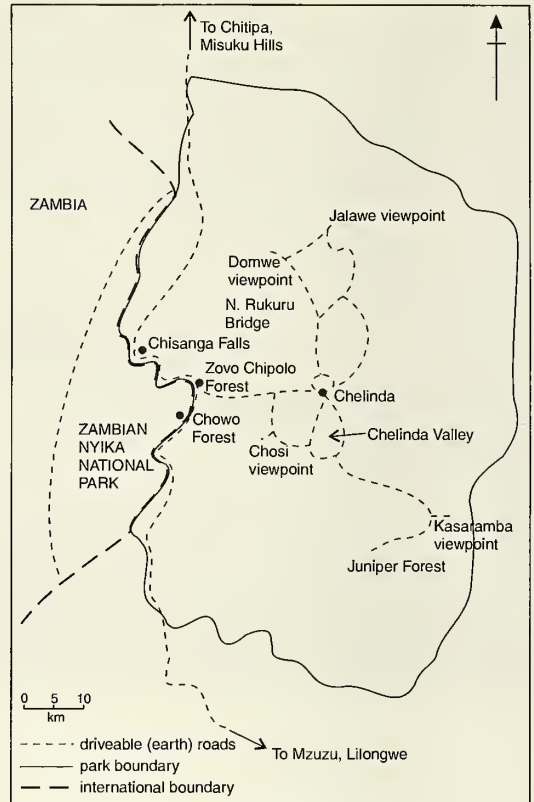
There are expensive first-class hotels in the main towns, cheaper rest-houses in all urban centres. All wildlife reserves and larger forest reserves have accommodation of varying standards. Don't miss the tented camp in Liwonde.

Health

Malaria is a major risk so prophylaxis is essential and normally effective. DO take any other precautions your doctor recommends. The lake is generally free from bilharzia at the main beaches but don't paddle in still water or around reeds. Elephants in Liwonde can be dangerous so give them a wide berth.

Customs of the country

Malawians, officials and public alike, are very friendly and helpful, although courtesy and patience are prerequisites. The infamous, archaic dress regulations have been repealed but it is still best not to go around in grunge or semi-naked. The country is mainly Christian, although the southern lakeshore is predominantly



Nyika Plateau
Plateau de Nyika

Moslem. Officials are suspicious about photography at the airport and official buildings/bridges so DON'T.

Publications

Field guides: Newman's *Birds of Southern Africa*; Newman's *Birds of Malawi*; Sasol *Birds of Southern Africa*. **Checklists:** Wildlife society national checklist card; useful annotated checklists for the wildlife reserves and Lilongwe. **Others/journals:** The excellent *Birds of Malawi* by Benson & Benson (1977) was the last summary of ornithology but is now somewhat dated and out of print. Fieldwork for a national atlas has been completed and publication is awaited. The Wildlife Society (Box 1429, Blantyre) publishes papers and all interesting fauna and flora records in its journal *Nyala*, also a quarterly newsletter *Vocifer*.

Records and rarities

General records to Stewart Lane, Box 51147, Limbe. Rarities should be reported with supporting details to Mrs D Hanmer, Mitsasa, P O Box 3076, Paulington, Mutare, Zimbabwe. 🐦

2 Staplake Cottages, Starcross, Devon EX6 8QT, UK.

The Nyika Plateau

In the north of the country, this is perhaps Malawi's premier birdwatching destination. Rolling montane grassland with rainforest patches surrounded by *Brachystegia* covered foothills. The road across the plateau forms the international border with Zambia. The greater part of the plateau lies within Malawi although the Zambian part is also a national park, to which access is possible without going through immigration/customs although a separate (and expensive) park entry permit is required (in theory).

Getting there and back

A direct drive from Lilongwe takes at least seven hours without stopping so it's best to break the journey at Chikangawa Rest-house in the Viphya Hills (book through Forestry Department) or at Mzuzu (Mzuzu Hotel - plush but expensive - or Government rest-house). If you have time, an alternative return trip is best via Nkhata Bay and the lakeshore road. Even better, extend your trip to head even further north for the Misuku Hills via Chitipa (look out for the rare Oustalet's White-bellied Sunbird *Nectarinia oustleti* en route) and return via Karonga but beware the rough roads. 4WD is necessary only from Mzuzu onwards during the rains (January-April).

Accommodation

The Zambian rest-house is better located for the main forests: book through Robin Pope Safaris in Zambia. Otherwise, the main focal point of the Nyika is around Chelinda in the centre of the plateau, where there are three dams and the best grassland areas for birds. Chalets and bedroom block are clean if basic; there is also a basic campsite. For the intrepid there is a basic hut at the remote Juniper Forest. Booking in advance for all accommodation is essential. None has electricity. Take your own food, drink and fuel as the supply of all these is erratic.

Where to go

Assuming a minimum three night stay it is possible to visit the following.

Forests

Manjenjere and Chowo (in Zambia), Zovo Chipolo and Juniper, also small patches between border road and Chelinda.

Key birds

Dusky Turtle Dove *Streptopelia lugens*, Bar-tailed Trogan, Olive Woodpecker, Moustached Green

Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus leucomystax*, White-headed Saw-wing *Psolidoprocne albiceps*, African Hill Babbler, Western Mountain Bulbul *Andropadus tephrolaemus*, White-chested Alethe, Olive-flanked Robin-chat, Sharpe's Akalat *Sheppardia sharpei* (Manjenjere only), Brown Parisoma *Parisoma lugens* (only in *Acacias*), Chestnut-throated Apalis, Black-fronted Bush Shrike, Waller's Red-winged Starling *Onycognathus walleri*, Slender-billed Red-winged Starling *O. tenuirostris*, Green-headed Sunbird *Nectarinia verticalis* and Fülleborn's Black Boubou.

Riparian growth and valleys

The valley immediately below the administration camp at Thazima entrance gate; the valley below Dam 1 at Chelinda; Chelinda Bridge; North Rukuru Bridge.

Key birds

Black-backed Barbet *Lybius minor*, Trilling Cisticola *Cisticola woosnami*, Black-tailed Waxbill *Estrilda perreini*, Mountain Yellow Warbler *Chloropeta similis*, Marsh Tchagra *Tchagra minuta*, Greater Double-collared Sunbird, Baglafaecht Weaver *Ploceus baglafaecht*, Mountain Marsh Widow *Euplectes psammochromius*.

Grassland

Virtually anywhere is good but the best areas are along the border road, Chelinda Valley circular route and Chosi Viewpoint.

Key birds

Red-breasted Sparrowhawk, Red-winged Francolin *Francolinus levaillantii*, Wattled Crane, Denham's Bustard, Mountain Nightjar *Caprimulgus poliocephalus*, Scarce Swift *Schoutedenapus myoptilus*, Rufous-naped Lark, Angola Swallow *Hirundo angolensis*, Blue Swallow, Mountain Cisticola *Cisticola hunteri*, Churring Cisticola *C. njombe* and Ayres's Cloud Cisticola, Malachite and Scarlet-tufted Malachite Sunbirds, Yellow-crowned Canary *Serinus canicollis*, Streaky Seedeater *S. striolatus*.

Brachystegia woodland

Allow some time entering and leaving the park to check out the woodland on either side of Thazima Gate for bird parties.

Key birds

Golden-breasted Bunting *Emberiza flaviventris*, Whyte's Barbet *Stactolaema whytii*, Anchieta's Sunbird and White-tailed Blue Flycatcher. ♀